

Scarlet River

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Chapter One:

Your Heart is an Empty Room

The tears that had been falling down Eliza's face finally came to a stop as the mysterious drug sunk in. Flashes from her past ran through her mind. She could see herself learning how to ride a bike and her first kiss. She saw countless days filled with familiar faces. Then she could see her husband; the first day they met and every moment that followed.

Darkness filled Eliza's hazel green eyes as her past was wiped clean.

"Eliza?" her husband whimpered.

The magnetic steel tying her hands together unfastened and suddenly she was free.

"Eliza! Hurry! Use the gun to shoot me free. Aim for the lock and—"

Eliza reached for the gun that was laid precisely in the middle of the concrete floor, pointed it at her husband's head, and pulled the trigger.

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A redhead with long, curly hair walked past Logan Vern. His heart started as he leaned up in his chair and waited anxiously for the girl to turn around. As expected, she—along with the other countless gingers he'd seen—was not her. Let down and a little relieved, Logan rested his head back and tried to fall asleep. But the image of a beautiful, redheaded girl remained on his mind.

After landing, Logan was picked up by two agents in a black SUV and was taken to the CIA office in Las Vegas. He walked into the agency and headed to the debriefing room. To his surprise, he was greeted with a large banner, balloons, and a cake.

"Happy birthday!" the crowd around the table greeted.

With wide eyes, Logan smiled. "Uh, thanks..."

"It was my idea," a brunette named Kimberly said.

Another girl glared. "It was my idea, Kim!"

Logan stepped back as another girl threw herself into the verbal fight.

Christine Burns walked in, her eyebrows raised as she read the banner. “Oh, Logan, it’s your birthday.”

Logan looked back as the girls continued to fight, unaware that their boss was in the room.

“Well, girls, if you don’t mind, we have a meeting to attend. Move the party out of the debriefing room.”

The girls weren’t listening.

“OI!” Burns shouted. “Out, now!”

The girls scattered as Logan took a seat.

“Mind?” Christine asked, pointing at the cake.

Logan cut her a piece and put it on a plate.

Burns took the cake gladly and glanced back at the girls now in a circle fighting.

“It’s interesting,” she began, “how intelligent, hard working females can turn into the most obnoxious teenagers the moment a handsome man is in their presence.”

Logan looked at her as though he didn’t follow. “Can we start the meeting?”

Burns laughed. “That’s why I like you, Vern. You’re head’s screwed on right.”

After the meeting, a dozen other girls wished Logan a happy birthday. If it weren’t for his eidetic memory, he wouldn’t be able to recall a single one of their names considering he barely talked to any of them. So how did they remember his birthday?

When he came home to his one bedroom apartment, he felt relieved to be away from all the attention. Plopping down on the couch, he reached for his bag of potato chips and peanut butter M&Ms and browsed through his movie collection.

Logan’s apartment was what most men would call the perfect bachelor pad. He had thousands of movies, every type of entertainment system, and the lights of Las Vegas as his view. But even as he sat comfortably on his expensive sofa, Logan waited for his beeper to go off and return to his life as a spy.

His phone rang, making his heart start until he read the caller ID.

“Hey, Mom,” he answered.

“Happy birthday!” she half-shouted. “I know you’re probably with all of your friends, but I wanted to make sure you knew your parents loved you!”

Logan looked around his empty apartment. “I think I have a minute to chat,” he said. “Anything new?”

“Well, my son just turned twenty-three!”

“That’s old. You must be ancient,” Logan teased as he reached for his game controller and began playing mindlessly.

“I want to hear about you. Any girlfriends?”

“Nothing recent.”

“Well, I know I’m not supposed to talk about you-know-who, but—”

“We’ve been through this, Mom.”

Julia sighed. “Fine. When are you going to visit us?”

Logan beat the game and advanced to the next level. “My life’s pretty busy, these days.”

“Any big sales?” she asked.

To everyone who wasn’t affiliated with the CIA, Logan was a traveling salesman. Nobody, not even his mother suspected he was anything more.

“Just came back from Denver,” he lied. “It was a success, you could say.” Bored of the game, Logan paused and focused on his mother instead. Even though she called every other day, it was always nice to hear her voice.

“What are you doing for your birthday? Anything exciting?”

Logan looked down at the junk food in his arms and the paused video game in front of him. He knew she wouldn’t approve. “I’m going out with a few friends. I—”

“Well, I’ll let you go, then! Have a great time, sweetie! Love you!”

Logan wanted to argue that he didn’t need her to go, but she was already gone. And then he was alone.

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Logan woke up with his chip bag dangling from his hands and M&Ms melted all over his chest and stomach. His phone was vibrating. It was a memo from work telling him he needed to see Burns. He quickly jumped into the shower, washed off the candy stains and chip crumbs, and dressed in his favorite suit.

He left the door feeling accomplished. Normally he had to wait a couple of days before another mission. Getting into his silver Lexus, Logan sped to the agency. He was anxious to get to work. He didn't want to be stuck in his apartment for another minute.

Burns was in a meeting so Logan waited at his desk. He was reviewing some old case files when she interrupted.

"Agent Vern," Burns greeted. "Can I see you in my office?"

Logan followed, passing a few blushing girls on the way.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long," she stated, closing the door behind her.

"No," he replied.

Burns sat down and straightened the files on her desk before speaking. "I'm moving you."

"Undercover?" Logan's heart quickened. It was the perfect opportunity... No more waiting for missions to come to him: his life would be a mission.

"Not exactly... There's a town we've dedicated for CIA purposes. They call it Impression. Agents who reside there...well, your term will be indefinite, let's just say."

"When do I leave?" Logan asked.

Burns laughed. "You're my most willing agent; along with your dedication and loyalty to the CIA, that's why you've been chosen for this job. But this is semi-permanent; you won't be able to leave as you please. It's one of the ways we're able to keep the town's location and purpose a secret."

"When do I leave?" he repeated.

"Six months."

"Okay," Logan wasn't sure what he should say. "Was that everything?"

Burns frowned. "Part of your new calling will require us to remove you from all future missions."

"Excuse me?"

"We don't want any eyes on you when you leave for Impression. You won't hear from us during those six months, and it's crucial that you don't contact anyone from the agency."

Logan looked at her, feeling confused.

“In other words, you’re fired,” she explained. “We’ll give you more than enough money to live by until the move.”

“So... I’m...” Logan was at a loss for words.

“Believe me; this opportunity is only given to the best of our agents. And at such a young age, it’s truly an honor. I’ll let you know anything you need to know when the time is right.”

Logan nodded but he still didn’t understand.

“Pack up your things,” Burns said. “According to anyone outside of this office, you’re fired. It was a pleasure working with you.” She stood up and shook his hand.

Six months... It was hard enough waiting a couple of days for his next mission. What was he supposed to do for six months?

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Logan returned to his apartment and paced around. He had returned his pager and his badge. It was hard to believe that all of his dedication was finally getting rewarded. He also couldn’t believe that his achievement felt a lot like losing. His phone rang.

“Hey,” he said to his partner, Andrew Hertz.

“I just heard,” Andrew said. “Please tell me you’re not eating M&Ms.”

“What do you mean?” Logan asked, looking over at the empty candy bag.

“It’s a thing you do. Maybe you should, I don’t know, get out and have fun instead of filling the void with junk food.”

“I don’t have anything to fill. My termination was a mutual agreement,” he lied.

“Yeah, I don’t buy it.”

Logan walked onto his balcony and gazed over the glorious city. “Believe what you want,” he said.

“Come out with me and some friends. We’re hitting the casinos.”

“I have to figure out my next plan,” Logan said.

“What better way than the strip?”

“I’ll pass, but thanks.”

“You know, there’s more to life than your apartment and work. There’s an entire world out there full of desperate chicks and blackjack tables!”

Logan cringed. "Maybe next time."

"You've been saying that for over a year now. This is next time so come on!"

"Bye, Andrew." Logan hung up and ran a hand over his face. He walked over to his kitchen and pulled out some ingredients. He spent the next three hours cooking. The smell of food calmed his nerves. But after eating, he was left with nothing to do. So he opened his alphabetized movie collection and pulled out the first DVD. He watched movie after movie until sleep overcame him. In the morning, after making a fancy breakfast, he started up where he left off and continued through his movie selection.

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A week had passed and the only time Logan stepped outside was to go for a run or buy groceries. He made it to the H movies and was mindlessly watching *Hook* while surfing the net.

It would be so easy for him to type in her name and find out what she was doing or where she lived. With his connections, he could track her every step. It was the obsession that followed his curious ambition that prevented him from doing so. Still, he couldn't help but wonder where she was.

Andrew continued to call but after awhile Logan stopped answering. It wasn't that he had the strong desire to remain hidden; he just didn't want Andrew to pity him. But as days and weeks continued to pass, Logan wondered how he was supposed to live like this for six months. He needed to be a part of something...

Picking up his phone, he dialed his mother.

"Logan! Hi, sweetie!"

"Hey, Mom," Logan said. "What's new?"

"You calling me," she joked.

"I had some spare time," he said.

"Well, I'm planning this year's spring block party," she answered. "It's next week."

"Oh," Logan said, seeing his opportunity. "How are the neighbors? The Richmond clan still throwing their annual Christmas party?"

“They actually moved away after Christa graduated. I think they’re retired somewhere in Florida. I know... How nice would that be? Your father hates tropical beaches, though. I just don’t understand how anyone could hate tropical beaches. But your father’s one of a kind for sure... Anyways, the Gages are throwing the Christmas party now.”

“What about the Masons?” he asked, slowly leading up to the person he was most interested in hearing about.

“If you want to know about you-know-who, just ask,” she said.

“Who?” Logan asked just as the answer came to him. “Oh, no! I was just making conversation.”

“Well, she’s—”

“Mom, I really don’t want to know. Is the Andersons still there?” Logan asked, regretting his slow attempt to find out about his old mentor.

“Gale is. They divorced shortly after you left.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. They seemed really happy.” Logan waited. He knew he was at a crossroads. He could stay here for several months and get nothing done; or find a simple job with the man who helped him become the agent he is today.

“Is there something wrong, sweetie?”

“No, I was just...” Logan closed his eyes. The moment he said the words, he knew he wouldn’t be able to take them back. After a long, fighting moment of hesitation, he said, “I’m coming home.”